# DIRECT INVESTIGATION REPORT

# FREE ADMISSION SCHEME FOR LEISURE FACILITIES FROM JULY TO SEPTEMBER 2008

March 2009

Office of The Ombudsman

Hong Kong

# CONTENTS

*EXECUTIVE SUMMARY*

| *Chapter* | | *Paragraph* |
|---|---|---|
| *1* | *INTRODUCTION* | *1.1 - 1.9* |
| *2* | *THE SCHEME* | |
| | *Objectives of the Scheme* | *2.1 - 2.2* |
| | *Previous Schemes* | *2.3 - 2.7* |
| | *Existing Free Use Scheme* | *2.8* |
| | *2008 Scheme* | *2.9 - 2.27* |
| *3* | *USAGE* | |
| | *Attendances* | *3.1 - 3.2* |
| | *Usage of Booking Channels* | *3.3* |
| | *Usage of Facilities* | *3.4 - 3.13* |
| *4* | *REVIEW AND EVALUATION* | |
| | *Complaints* | *4.1 - 4.5* |
| | *Other Views* | *4.6 - 4.7* |
| | *Suggestions for Improvement* | *4.8* |
| | *LCSD Reviews* | *4.9 - 4.13* |
| | *Booking Service at a Charge* | *4.14 - 4.17* |
| *5* | *OBSERVATIONS AND OPINIONS* | |
| | *Objectives of the Scheme* | *5.1 - 5.4* |
| | *Planning* | *5.5 - 5.10* |
| | *Execution* | *5.11 - 5.13* |
| | *Prevention of Abuse* | *5.14 - 5.20* |
| | *Review and Evaluation* | *5.21 - 5.22* |
| | *Booking Service at a Charge* | *5.23 - 5.24* |
| | *Revised Scheme* | *5.25 - 5.27* |
| *6* | *RECOMMENDATIONS* | *6.1 - 6.4* |

*ANNEXES*

| | |
|---|---|
| *I* | *List of Responsible Officers for the Planning and Monitoring of Implementation of the Scheme* |
| *II* | *Types and Number of Facilities under the Scheme* |
| *III* | *Voice-over Script for the Radio APIs of the Scheme Broadcast from 29 May to 30 September 2008* |

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Direct Investigation on Free Admission Scheme for Leisure Facilities from July to September 2008

### Background

The Chief Executive announced in his 2007-08 Policy Address on 10 October 2007 a plan to highlight the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games as a main theme in promoting national education. The object was "so people will understand our country better and have a shared sense of national pride" and to promote sports among the public. To these ends, he announced making available for free public use from 1 July to 30 September 2008 the sports and recreational facilities managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department ("LCSD"). At once, LCSD started to plan for the 92-day Free Admission Scheme ("the Scheme").

2. The Scheme was well intended but received much public criticism, prompting The Ombudsman to initiate a direct investigation into the Scheme, in the hope that this experience could offer useful reference for other projects and similar initiatives in future.

### The Scheme

3. The objectives of the Scheme were:

- to support the Beijing Olympic Games;
- to encourage the public to exercise more regularly; and
- to promote community sports.

#### *Planned Arrangements*

4. LCSD's planning took reference from two previous schemes of free admission. We summarise the main features of the three schemes:

| | Post-SARS Free Admission in 2003 | Celebration of 10th Anniversary of HKSAR in 2007 | The Scheme in 2008 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Duration** | Five public holidays in July (including four Sundays) | Two public holidays (1-2 July) | 92 days from July to September |
| **Facilities** | - Indoor leisure facilities<br>- Swimming pools | - Indoor leisure facilities<br>- Swimming pools | - Indoor leisure facilities<br>- Swimming pools<br>- Outdoor leisure facilities (excluding sports grounds and turf pitches)<br>- Water sports centres facilities<br>- Holiday camps |
| **Sessions Available** | 112,835 | 76,783 | Over 3,000,000 |
| **Booking Channels for Facilities other than Swimming Pools** | Free permits pre-distributed at venues | LCSD counters | All booking channels under Leisure Link System ("LLS"):<br>- Counters<br>- Internet<br>- Telephone<br>- Self-service kiosks (launched on 3 March 2008) |
| **Booking Period** | Monday before each free-admission day | 7 days in advance | 30 days in advance |

5. **Enhancement of Booking Channels.** Since migration to GovHK, Government's one-stop portal, in January 2008, LLS has been enhanced to ensure system stability and to reduce processing time for all booking channels. In May 2008, in anticipation of overwhelming response to the Scheme, LCSD further enhanced the system to reduce the average transaction time of each internet booking by 30 seconds, from 2.5 to 2 minutes, and to increase correspondingly the number of concurrent users from 800 to 1,100.

6. **Prevention of Abuse.** Measures were introduced to prevent abuse of the Scheme: (a) each person could book a maximum of two sessions a day, irrespective of facilities; and (b) a minimum number of users was required for some facilities.

7. **Publicity.** LCSD announced details for free use of camp facilities on 3 March 2008, as application for such facilities for July could be made before 31 March. Details of the Scheme were announced in the second round of publicity launched on 9 May 2008. Publicity was

conducted through the media, posters, banners, leaflets and newspaper advertisements. A specially designed LCSD webpage was launched for the Scheme. Radio Announcements of Public Interest ("APIs") publicised the Scheme from 29 May to 30 September 2008.

*Improvement during the Scheme Period*

8. **Monitoring of Attendance.** LCSD's original plan was for venues to collate statistics on usage and absence of original hirers and report to the Headquarters monthly. Upon public criticism since booking started in June, LCSD revised the arrangements and required venues to provide statistics on a daily basis from 1 July 2008.

9. **Cancellation of Bookings.** Normally, hirers may request cancellation of bookings in writing, but there will be no refund. Requests for a change of time for a confirmed booking are deemed by LCSD to be cancellation. However, this is only briefly mentioned among other matters in the Conditions of Use for Leisure Facilities. Meanwhile, information on LCSD website states that since a hirer has already paid for the booking, it cannot be changed or cancelled. Having considered complaints and suggestions about the Scheme, LCSD made available at venues a standard form from 18 July 2008 to facilitate cancellation, so as to release vacated sessions for booking by others. Completed forms or cancellation requests in writing could be sent to the venues concerned for processing.

10. **Other Measures to Prevent Wastage.** Since mid-July 2008, greater flexibility was exercised in the use of vacant sessions of land-based facilities. Lanes in swimming pools reserved for groups or programmes, but with low attendance, would be released for use by the public.

**Usage**

*Attendances*

11. The Scheme attracted over 12.8 million attendances, including more than 7.62 million to swimming pools and more than 5 million to land-based facilities. For the around 322,000 hirers of land-based facilities, about 50% (or 161,000) had not booked any LCSD facilities in the previous 12 months.

*Booking Channels*

12. The total number of over 2,489,000 bookings through the four channels under the Scheme was doubled, when compared with the same period in 2007.

### *Facilities*

13. Except holiday camps which had a three percent point decrease in usage compared to the same period in 2007, all other facilities: every land-based facility, water sports centres and swimming pools, registered increased usage. Some increases were fairly significant, e.g. swimming pool attendances surged 68% and overall land-based facilities increased 26 percent point to 76%.

14. However, wastage could be serious. For land-based facilities, most were booked over 90% under the Scheme. Of these booked sessions, an average of 62% were used by original hirers, 16% by walk-in users and the remaining 22% unused. This indicated an absence rate of original hirers of 38%. Some situations were even more serious. Our spot check revealed 74% and 78% no-show rate on some days in certain facilities of a sports centre. The absence rate of original hirers of craft at water sports centres even reached 54%.

## Review and Evaluation

15. Since its launch, the Scheme received much criticism from the public. LCSD received a total of 1,059 complaints about the Scheme. Most were related to difficulty in booking, lack of safeguard against abuse and wastage from no-show, and congestion in on-line booking.

16. This Office received 33 complaints from June to September 2008 about the Scheme on issues similar to those received by LCSD.

17. We received 23 public submissions for this direct investigation. Most of them offered views similar to those expressed in complaints but seven were in praise of the Scheme for taking care of the needs of the less well-off in the community and encouraging people to exercise more. LCSD also received 20 submissions in praise of the Scheme from different channels.

### *Suggestions for Improvement*

18. During the interim review in early July 2008, LCSD considered the suggestions for improvement raised by the public not suitable for implementation for the remaining period of the Scheme.

19. By March 2009, LCSD was in the final stage of completing a preliminary evaluation report on the Scheme. LCSD indicated that some of the suggestions could be helpful for similar events in future, provided certain hurdles were overcome and sufficient resources made available.

LCSD will take into account the recommendations of this direct investigation before deciding on the improvement measures.

## Observations and Opinions

### *Objectives of the Scheme*

20. The increase in usage of most facilities and the fact that over half of the hirers of land-based facilities under the Scheme were "infrequent hirers" proved that the Scheme had succeeded in promoting interest in sports and exercise. The Scheme was clearly welcome by many, as reflected by the support voiced by some members of the public, and by others implicitly through participation.

21. In principle and in concept, we consider the Scheme laudable. The objectives are certainly positive. Given the considerable scale and duration of the Scheme launched in the summer months, it was no easy task for LCSD. Broadly speaking, LCSD has discharged itself commendably. Nevertheless, there were deficiencies in arrangements.

### *Planning*

22. LCSD had deployed high-level subject officers, under the leadership of an Assistant Director, to plan and execute the Scheme and also to monitor implementation. The team generally did well in the latter task: keeping a watching brief to make changes in some arrangements from mid-July.

23. **Booking.** In estimating usage of facilities under the Scheme, LCSD had sensibly not only drawn reference from the two previous schemes, but particularly assessed the popularity of various facilities. For greater public convenience, in view of the large volume of sessions available for booking over a considerable duration, it decided to use all four established booking channels instead of just one single booking channel as had been done for the previous two schemes.

24. LCSD upgraded the LLS internet booking channel to cater for the anticipated significant increase in booking under the Scheme. However, owing to the limited supply of popular facilities and sessions, free admission would inevitably occasion a surge in booking attempts during the peak time. LCSD's consideration on enhancing the booking capacity was a matter of judgment on striking a balance between prudent use of public resources, convenience to the public and equal opportunities in making booking for a one-off scheme of three months.

25. We accept that LCSD had taken realistic and reasonable steps — as indicated in its planned schedule for LLS enhancement, testing and rolling-out — to plan carefully for the anticipated influx of bookings under the Scheme.

26. **Publicity.** The publicity plan of the Scheme did not anticipate the need for changes after the Scheme's roll-out. As a result, interim measures and special arrangements during the Scheme were not fully publicised.

27. **Monitoring.** The initial plan of collating monthly statistics indicated not only an under-estimation of the size of the wastage problem due to no-show but low alertness of the need for close monitoring of the demand for facilities upon roll-out of the Scheme.

***Execution***

28. **Publicity.** In the execution stage, LCSD failed to publicise its interim measures, to promote the less popular facilities and to address the public outcry through the media. It may not be easy to incorporate changes into pre-printed materials such as posters and leaflets, but newspapers and the electronic media could have helped relay more effectively messages at short notice, in different stages during the Scheme.

29. **Monitoring.** Despite deficiencies in planning, LCSD is commended for acting promptly to rectify defects once detected. Monthly monitoring of usage was quickly upgraded to daily monitoring, a standard form for cancellation was introduced at an early stage and the initial requirement for a minimum number of users, introduced for preventing abuse, was soon relaxed.

***Prevention of Abuse***

30. **Cancellation of Bookings.** LCSD had clearly under-estimated the incidence of no-show by original hirers, which reached 38% for land-based facilities, and thus had no plan for publicising or streamlining the arrangements for cancelling bookings. However, the Department was quick to identify and rectify this by introducing a cancellation form from 18 July.

31. On the other hand, the procedures for cancellation were fraught with deficiencies and were not user-friendly. The form was not available for downloading from the LCSD website. There was little publicity. The low cancellation figures speak for the ineffectiveness of the procedures: 420 cancellations, or 0.05%, *versus* about 800,000 no-shows.

32. To some extent, the incidence of notified cancellation does indicate that responsible hirers were prepared to take the extra time and trouble to release their booked sessions for others. We applaud their civic-mindedness. LCSD should streamline the procedures and properly publicise the cancellation arrangements even for normal fee-paying bookings.

33. **Usage of Facilities.** The high no-show rate of original hirers and high wastage rate of booked sessions, even taking into account subsequent walk-in uses, indicated a sheer waste of public resources. LCSD should look into these cases, identify the reasons for the high no-show rates and work out preventive and promotional measures for future schemes of this nature.

34. LCSD should also consider public education messages for responsible use of public facilities.

35. For facilities such as fitness rooms, sport climbing walls and craft at water sports centres, where booking rates were low due to the requirement of proof of proficiency, corresponding training sessions, with proper promotion, might help boost interest and usage in these activities.

***Review and Evaluation***

36. LCSD has been quick to review its arrangements albeit in response to complaints and criticisms. It has considered comments and suggestions raised by the public, some of which would involve costly and time-consuming changes to the booking or refund systems. It would not be realistic, or worthwhile, to introduce these mid-way during the Scheme. However, these suggestions are well worth studying for similar initiatives in the future.

***Revised Scheme***

37. To encourage the public to exercise and to maximise use of under-utilised facilities, we see a case for a scheme on a smaller scale and on a regular basis. A good example is the free access to LCSD museums every Wednesday. LCSD should consider exploring other options, bearing the main considerations of: (a) access on a regular basis, not *ad hoc*; and (b) measures against abuse and wastage.

38. We note LCSD's scheme since 2000 for schools and organisations to use some under-utilised facilities during non-peak hours free of charge. It should publicise the scheme more widely and consider extending its coverage beyond the present beneficiaries. We believe that with more prudent planning, infrequent users thus attracted could be managed without undue interference with the frequent and paying patrons.

**Recommendations**

39. Initiatives like the Scheme have demonstrably helped to generate public interest in sports and LCSD facilities. However, the Scheme has also attracted some outcry of public dissatisfaction. From our findings, The Ombudsman makes the following recommendations:

(1) When planning for similar initiatives, care should be taken to balance the interests of both regular paying patrons and prospective clientele attracted by free admission.

(2) To build in flexibility in both planning and execution of publicity arrangements for timely and effective announcement of changes, interim measures and special arrangements.

(3) To build in mechanism for close monitoring of implementation, right from the outset.

(4) To provide user-friendly arrangements for cancellation of bookings both during normal fee-paying days and for free admission schemes.

(5) To appeal to the public for responsible use of public facilities.

(6) To institute safeguards for detecting, deterring and preventing abuse.

(7) To keep a watching brief on the commercial booking services at a charge.

(8) To analyse the data on usage of facilities and booking channels to devise incentives for use of under-utilised facilities.

(9) To consider promoting the existing Free Use Scheme more widely and extending its coverage beyond the present beneficiaries to maximise the usage of under-utilised facilities.

40. LCSD has accepted all the recommendations. We will monitor progress of implementation.

**Office of The Ombudsman**
**March 2008**

# 1

# INTRODUCTION

## BACKGROUND

**1.1** The Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region ("HKSAR") announced in his 2007-08 Policy Address on 10 October 2007 a plan to highlight the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games as a main theme in promoting national education, "so people will understand our country better and have a shared sense of national pride" and to promote sports among the public[1]. To accomplish these ends, he announced making available for public use free of charge from 1 July to 30 September 2008 the sports and recreational facilities managed by the Leisure and Cultural Services Department ("LCSD"), including public swimming pools, water sports centre, tennis courts, squash courts and holiday camps.

**1.2** LCSD started to plan for the 92-day Free Admission Scheme ("the Scheme") right after the Chief Executive's announcement.

**1.3** This Office received 33 complaints during June to September 2008 relating to the Scheme, mainly from regular users of LCSD facilities on difficulty in booking the facilities, wastage and abuse of the system and grievance over being squeezed out. It is evident that the Scheme was well intended, to enable the community to share the joy of China hosting the Olympic Games. It was to be just a one-off concession, not likely ever to be repeated. However, in the course of handling these complaints, we found issues that warranted a more comprehensive study. Moreover, we consider the Scheme to offer useful reference for other projects and similar initiatives in future.

---

[1] *2007-08 Policy Address, paragraph 121.*

1.4 The Ombudsman, therefore, decided to initiate a direct investigation into the Scheme pursuant to section 7(1)(a)(ii) of The Ombudsman Ordinance, Cap. 397.

1.5 On 20 November 2008, The Ombudsman informed the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services of her decision. This direct investigation was then declared by media announcement on 11 December 2008.

## PURPOSE AND AMBIT

1.6 This direct investigation examines:

(a) planning for and execution of the Scheme;

(b) problems encountered in implementation, whether anticipated or not, and measures taken to tackle them; and

(c) lessons to be learnt for similar initiatives in future.

## METHODOLOGY

1.7 We have studied relevant statistics, complaints and LCSD's preliminary evaluation report on the Scheme. We have also visited three sports centres – Sheung Wan, Shek Kip Mei Park and Yuen Wo Road, and reviewed the records on usage in July to September of their major facilities during the Scheme.

1.8 Members of the public were invited to give comments and suggestions between 11 December 2008 and 12 January 2009. We received 23 submissions.

## INVESTIGATION REPORT

1.9 A draft investigation report was sent on 9 March 2009 to LCSD, whose comments were received on 20 March 2009. We met LCSD representatives on the same day to discuss their comments. This final report, incorporating LCSD's comments as appropriate, was issued on 24 March 2009.

# 2

# *THE SCHEME*

## OBJECTIVES OF THE SCHEME

**2.1** The Scheme was to:

- support the Beijing Olympic Games;
- encourage the public to exercise more regularly; and
- promote community sports.

**2.2** Right after the announcement of the Scheme in the Policy Address on 10 October 2007, LCSD set about planning, taking reference from two previous schemes for free admission. The planning and monitoring of implementation, led by an Assistant Director (Leisure Services), involved 18 other senior officers in headquarters responsible for land-based venues, aquatic venues, camps, golf facilities, information technology and publicity respectively (see **Annex I**).

## PREVIOUS SCHEMES

### *Post-SARS Free Admission in 2003*

**2.3** To rejuvenate Hong Kong residents after the SARS crisis came under control, the public was given free use of LCSD indoor leisure facilities and swimming pools on the public holiday of 1 July and the following four Sundays in July 2003. For indoor facilities, permits for admission were distributed one week in advance for one person at any one time. For swimming pools, the public simply queued at the entrance before each of three sessions, from 6:30 am to 10 pm, for admission.

2.4 The five-day scheme attracted an attendance of over one million, including about 800,000 to swimming pools. Usage rate of individual facilities ranged from 21% to 93%. Take-up rate by original hirers was not recorded.

*Celebration of $10^{th}$ Anniversary of HKSAR in 2007*

2.5 To celebrate the $10^{th}$ Anniversary of the Establishment of the HKSAR, LCSD again allowed free admission to its indoor leisure facilities and swimming pools on the public holidays of 1 and 2 July 2007. Arrangements for admission to swimming pools remained the same, while use of indoor facilities was by booking at LCSD counters on a first-come-first-served basis. Each person could book, at most, one session at one facility each day.

2.6 The two-day scheme attracted an attendance of almost 290,000, including over 163,000 at swimming pools. Usage rates of various facilities ranged from 22% to 98%. About 8% of the users who made bookings failed to turn up for their booked sessions.

2.7 Public feedback on both schemes suggested inclusion of more leisure facilities for free use, better crowd control at swimming pools, better publicity, coaching for untrained users for such facilities as fitness rooms which required proof of qualification. LCSD considered that overall, the two schemes had been well received by the public.

## EXISTING FREE USE SCHEME

2.8 Since September 2000, LCSD has implemented a scheme for free use by schools, national sports associations, district sports associations and non-government organisations of some under-utilised facilities. These include arenas and activity rooms in sports centres, squash courts, hockey pitches, outdoor bowling greens and obstacle golf courses. Admission is on weekdays, from opening time to 5 pm, throughout the year except July and August.

**2008 SCHEME**

***Planned Arrangements***

*Facilities Included*

**2.9** In 2008, in addition to indoor facilities and swimming pools, LCSD included in the Scheme outdoor facilities (excluding sports grounds and turf pitches), five water sports centres and four holiday camps. The expansion in facilities included was in response to comments received in the 2007 scheme. In total, over 3 million sessions of 150 venues were available for free booking by individuals. The full list is at **Annex II**.

*Facilities Excluded*

**2.10** With indoor venues, upon no-show of team sports players (such as in basketball, netball and volleyball), they can be readily converted for walk-in users for playing badminton and table tennis. However, turf pitches for team sports only (such as football, rugby, baseball and hockey) will probably be left vacant if the original hirers[2] fail to show, as teams are unlikely to try their luck for walk-in use. Moreover, such pitches are already under high demand[3]. Turf pitches were thus excluded from the Scheme; so too, sports grounds which are exclusively for booking by organisations.

*Publicity*

**2.11** LCSD announced details for free use of camp facilities at holiday camps and Chong Hing Water Sports Centre on 3 March 2008, as application for such facilities for July 2008 could be made before 31 March 2008. Publicity was launched from early March through a press release, a newspaper supplement, posters, banners and a specially designed webpage on the camp facilities.

**2.12** Details of the Scheme were announced in the second round of publicity launched on 9 May 2008 through the media, posters, banners and leaflets. Advertisements were taken out in nine newspapers from 26 to 29 May. A specially

---

[2] *A hirer is a person in whose name a venue or facility is booked and paid for, as distinct from a user of the booked venue or facility, who may not be the hirer. Under the Free Admission Scheme, a hirer refers to a person in whose name a venue or facility is booked but who need not pay for the booking under the Scheme.*

[3] *According to LCSD, in 2007-08, usage rates for natural and turf pitches were 100% and 76% respectively.*

designed LCSD webpage was launched for the Scheme. Radio Announcements of Public Interest ("APIs") publicised the Scheme, with no change in content from 29 May to 30 September (see **Annex III**).

*Booking*

**2.13** In view of the wide range of facilities available and the relatively long duration of the Scheme, LCSD decided that the established booking procedures and conditions for use that are familiar to the public should apply to facilitate booking and avoid confusion. The essential features were:

(a) Bookings of land-based facilities and craft at water sports centres can be made through all four existing booking channels under the Leisure Link System ("LLS") — LCSD venue counters, internet, telephone and self-service kiosks in LCSD venues.

(b) Individual users can make bookings up to 30 days in advance on a first-come-first-served basis.

(c) Bookings are not transferable. Hirers must produce proof of identity, valid permit or approval letter and recognised proof of proficiency (if applicable) for verification before using the facility.

(d) A booked facility not claimed within ten minutes will be allocated to walk-in users for free use on a first-come-first-served basis. However, the facility will have to be returned to the original hirer upon his/her arrival.

**2.14** Admission to swimming pools was, as usual, by queuing outside the pools without prior booking. For admission to holiday camps and the day and tent camps at Chong Hing Water Sports Centre, normal arrangements applied, i.e. the public had to send booking forms to the venues by fax or by post. If applications exceeded the quota, allocation would be by ballot. Confirmation letters would be sent to successful applicants.

**2.15** The Scheme did not affect booking by organisations. Hire charges and booking procedures for them remained unchanged during the Scheme.

*Enhancement of Booking Channels*

**2.16** To cope with the anticipated volume of bookings, some enhancement to LCSD's computerised booking system was introduced. Since migration from the original LCSD computer system to GovHK[4] in January 2008, LLS has been enhanced to ensure system stability and to cut time for processing bookings *via* all channels.

**2.17** In May 2008, in anticipation of overwhelming response to the Scheme, LCSD further enhanced the system to reduce the average transaction time of each internet booking by 30 seconds, from 2.5 to 2 minutes, and to increase correspondingly the number of concurrent internet users from 800 to 1,100. With these enhancements, transactions for the first half-hour between 7:00 and 7:30 am, the peak period for booking, increased three-fold each day for the duration of the Scheme.

**2.18** The LLS enhancement was rolled out in accordance with the following schedule as planned:

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| - | 31 December 2007 | Finalising the requirements for LLS enhancement to tie in with the Scheme |
| - | 5 February 2008 | LLS enhancement awarded to selected vendors |
| - | 4 March 2008 | Review the development progress on LLS enhancement |
| - | 19 April 2008 | Completion of first test to confirm the function on quota checking and issue of $0-value ticket |
| - | 2 May 2008 | Completion of second test on LLS enhancement |
| - | 16 May 2008 | Testing LLS enhancement in various outlets |

[4] *GovHK is Government's one-stop portal for easier online access to information and services of the public sector.*

- 28 May 2008 — Completion of production roll-out preparation of LLS enhancement
- 2 June 2008 — Commencement of booking under the Scheme

**2.19** A comparison of the main features of the 2003, 2007 and 2008 free admission schemes is summarised in **Table 1**.

**Table 1 Main Features of Three Schemes**

| | 2003 | 2007 | 2008 |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Duration** | Five public holidays in July (including four Sundays) | Two public holidays (1-2 July) | 92 days from July to September |
| **Facilities** | - Indoor leisure facilities<br>- Swimming pools | - Indoor leisure facilities<br>- Swimming pools | - Indoor leisure facilities<br>- Swimming pools<br>- Outdoor leisure facilities (excluding sports grounds and turf pitches)<br>- Water sports centres facilities<br>- Holiday camps |
| **Sessions Available** | 112,835 | 76,783 | Over 3,000,000 |
| **Booking Channels for Facilities other than Swimming Pools** | Free permits pre-distributed at venues | LCSD counters | All booking channels under LLS:<br>- Counters<br>- Internet<br>- Telephone<br>- Self-service kiosks (launched on 3 March 2008) |
| **Booking Period** | Monday before each free-admission day | 7 days in advance | 30 days in advance |

*Prevention of Abuse*

**2.20** Measures were introduced to prevent abuse of the Scheme:

(a) Each person could book a maximum of two sessions a day, irrespective of facilities[5].

(b) A minimum number of users was required for some facilities, e.g. eight persons for an indoor basketball/netball/volleyball court, four for an activity/games/dance room with an area of more than 100m².

***Improvement during the Scheme Period***

**2.21** LCSD conducted an interim review in early July, following which most of the improvement measures were introduced in mid-July 2008.

*Monitoring of Attendance*

**2.22** LCSD's original plan was for venues to collate statistics on usage and absence of original hirers and report to the Headquarters on a monthly basis. Upon public criticism since booking started in June, LCSD Headquarters revised the arrangements on 30 June 2008 and required venues to provide the statistics on a daily basis from 1 July 2008. The object was to get a better grasp of the situation.

*Cancellation of Bookings*

**2.23** Normally, cancellation of confirmed bookings with refund of charges can be initiated only by LCSD in case of inclement weather or such unforeseen situations as to make the facilities unsafe. Hirers who do not claim their sessions will forfeit their fee and the session will be allocated to walk-in users free of charge. Hirers may request cancellation in writing, but there will be no refund. Requests for a change of time for a confirmed booking are deemed by LCSD to be cancellation. However, this is only briefly mentioned among other matters in the Conditions of Use of for Leisure Facilities. Meanwhile, the answer to a "frequently asked question" on LCSD website on whether a hirer can change or cancel booking is "No. Since you have already paid for the booking, it cannot be changed or cancelled."

---

[5] *Outside the free admission period, each hirer is allowed to book a maximum of 2 hours' play during peak hours and 4 hours' play during non-peak hours for using a facility in a venue; except for water sports facilities, where a person can book a maximum of 6 hours' play for using each type of craft at a venue.*

**2.24** Having considered complaints and suggestions about the Scheme, LCSD designed a standard form to facilitate cancellation from 18 July 2008. The form was available at individual venues. Cancellation by the form or in writing should be sent to the venues concerned for processing. The form was not available for download from LCSD website. This form was promoted by adding one "frequently asked question" onto the webpage for the Scheme.

**2.25** During the Scheme, there were 420 requests for cancellation (or 0.05% of no-show).

*Other Measures to Prevent Wastage*

**2.26** For vacant sessions of land-based facilities without walk-in users at all or in the required number, flexibility was exercised by:

(a) allowing users of the previous session to continue; and

(b) relaxing the requirement of minimum number of users for dance room or a large activity/games room for walk-in users.

**2.27** For swimming pools, the lanes hired by group users or reserved for LCSD programmes, but with low attendance, were also released for use by members of the public.

**2.24** Having considered complaints and suggestions about the Scheme, LCSD designed a standard form to facilitate cancellation from 18 July 2008. The form was available at individual venues. Cancellation by the form or in writing should be sent to the venues concerned for processing. The form was not available for download from LCSD website. This form was promoted by adding one "frequently asked question" onto the webpage for the Scheme.

**2.25** During the Scheme, there were 420 requests for cancellation (or 0.05% of no-show).

*Other Measures to Prevent Wastage*

**2.26** For vacant sessions of land-based facilities without walk-in users at all or in the required number, flexibility was exercised by:

(a) allowing users of the previous session to continue; and

(b) relaxing the requirement of minimum number of users for dance room or a large activity/games room for walk-in users.

**2.27** For swimming pools, the lanes hired by group users or reserved for LCSD programmes, but with low attendance, were also released for use by members of the public.

# 3

# USAGE

## ATTENDANCES

**3.1** The Scheme attracted over 12.8 million attendances, including more than 7.62 million to swimming pools and more than 5 million to land-based facilities.

**3.2** The 5 million odd attendances of land-based facilities involved around 322,000 hirers, of which about 50% (or 161,000) of these hirers had not booked any LCSD facilities in the previous 12 months. Similar statistics were not available for swimming pools as no booking was required for their use.

## USAGE OF BOOKING CHANNELS

**3.3** The total number of bookings through the four channels under the Scheme was doubled, when compared with the same period in 2007. **Table 2** shows the usage of LCSD booking channels during the Scheme.

**Table 2 Usage of Booking Channels**

| | Counters | Internet | Telephone* | Self-service Kiosks# | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **July – Sept 2008** | 1,306,906 (+74%) | 981,346 (+230%) | 112,041 (-29%) | 89,304 | **2,489,597 (+107%)** |
| **July – Sept 2007** | 750,088 | 297,638 | 157,438 | NA | **1,205,164** |

*Source: LCSD*

* *The Leisure Link Telephone Services Centre (2927 8080) has 40 telephone lines. Thirty lines are answered by the Interactive Voice Response System ("IVRS") from 7:00am to 9:00pm. The other ten are answered by staff during working hours from 8:30am to 5:45pm and by IVRS from 7:00am to 8:30am and 5:45pm to 9:00pm.*

# *The Octopus-based services at 47 LCSD venues were introduced on 3 March 2008.*

*( ) denotes the percentage of increase or decrease in comparison with the same period in 2007.*

## USAGE OF FACILITIES

### *Land-Based Facilities*

**3.4** Normally, a booked session is considered "used" once it has been paid for, whether or not the hirer eventually turns up. There are, therefore, no statistics on "wastage" by hirers in normal circumstances.

**3.5** Under the Scheme, most facilities were booked over 90%. Those with relatively low booking rates were usually those requiring proof of proficiency. For instance, the fitness rooms had a booking rate of 57% and sport climbing walls 66%.

**3.6** The overall usage rate of various facilities, including uses by both individuals and groups, from July to September 2008 was 76%, compared with 50% in the same period of 2007.

**Table 3 Usage of Major Land-Based Facilities**

| Type of Facility | Sessions Booked (%) | Booked Sessions Used (%) | | | Overall Usage Rate (%)# | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | by Original Hirers (a) | by Walk-in Users (b) | Used (a+b) | July – Sept 2008 | July – Sept 2007 |
| Activity Rooms | 91 | 68 | 11 | 79 | 81 | 68 |
| Arenas* | 99 | 70 | 19 | 89 | 91 | 83 |
| Dance Rooms | 96 | 70 | 7 | 77 | 83 | 68 |
| Fitness Rooms | 57 | 63 | 9 | 72 | 46 | 34 |
| American Pool Tables | 99.5 | 53 | 36 | 89 | 90 | 59 |

| | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Golf Driving Ranges | 76 | 44 | 32 | 76 | 77 | 27 |
| Sport Climbing Walls | 66 | 51 | 7 | 58 | 69 | 36 |
| Squash Courts | 93 | 57 | 19 | 76 | 75 | 54 |
| Table Tennis Tables | 95 | 58 | 23 | 81 | 80 | 56 |
| Tennis Courts | 89 | 53 | 18 | 71 | 68 | 52 |
| **Total Average** | **78** | **62** | **16** | **78** | **76** | **50** |

*Source: LCSD*

* *Arenas are specially designed multi-purpose indoor games halls usually for badminton, basketball, netball or volleyball play.*

# *Including free usage of individual bookings under the Scheme and block-bookings by organisations whose hire charges remained unchanged during the Scheme.*

**3.7** For the booked sessions, an average of 62% were used by original hirers, 16% by walk-in users and the remaining 22% unused. The average absence rate of original hirers was 38%. The usage statistics revealed high booking rate *versus* poor turn-up rate of original hirers for some facilities:

**Table 4 Examples of High Booking Rate *versus* Poor Turn-up Rate of Hirers**

| Facility | Booking | Original hirer no-show |
|---|---|---|
| American pool tables | 99.5% | 47% |
| Table tennis tables | 95% | 42% |
| Squash courts | 93% | 43% |
| Tennis courts[6] | 89% | 47% |

**3.8** While **Tables 3 and 4** show the overall picture, our review of the records on usage (see **para. 1.7**) indicates that wastage can on occasion be more serious:

- Case 1: On 29 August, all 46 sessions for squash had been booked. However, only 12 sessions were used by original hirers and 13 by walk-in users, giving a wastage rate of 46%.

[6] *Rainfall was recorded in one-third of the days during the Scheme, which could have contributed to the poor turn-up rate, as 268 out of 270 tennis courts are outdoor.*

- Case 2: On 31 August, all 32 sessions for table tennis had been booked. However, only seven sessions were used by original hirers and 17 by walk-in users, resulting in a wastage rate of 25%.

**Table 5 Two Cases of Serious Wastage**

| Facility | Sessions Booked | Sessions No-show | Wastage Discounting Walk-in Users (%) | Sessions taken up by Walk-in Users | Final Wastage (%) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Squash | 46 | 34 | 74 | 13 | 46 |
| Table Tennis | 32 | 25 | 78 | 17 | 25 |

***Craft at Water Sports Centres***

**3.9** Craft at water sports centres has a relatively low booking rate of 23%, probably due to the requirement of proof of proficiency.

**Table 6 Usage of Craft at Water Sports Centres**

| Sessions Booked (%) | Booked Sessions Used (%) | | | Overall Usage Rate (%)* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | by Original Hirers (a) | by Walk-in Users (b) | Used (a+b) | July – Sept 2008 | July – Sept 2007 |
| 23 | 46 | 24 | 70 | 54 | 45 |

*Source: LCSD*

* *Including free usage of individual bookings under the Scheme and block-bookings by organisations whose hire charges remained unchanged during the Scheme*

***Holiday Camps***

**3.10** As holiday camps are in remote locations, walk-in use is unlikely. On average, 80% of the places available were booked and 77% of the hirers turned up. The overall usage rate of the camp places during the Scheme was 73%, compared with 76% for the same period in 2007.

*Swimming Pools*

**3.11** There were over 7,628,000 visitors to swimming pools during the Scheme, an increase of 68% compared with the attendance of over 4,549,000 for the same period in 2007.

**3.12** Overall, apart from holiday camps which had a three percent point decrease in usage (see **para. 3.10**), all other facilities: every land-based facility, water sports centres and swimming pools, registered increased usage. Some increases are fairly significant, e.g. golf driving ranges from 27% to 77% (see **Table 3**).

**3.13** While the Scheme has been successful in promoting usage of some facilities, wastage was serious with others, e.g. the 54% no-show rate of craft at water sports centres (see **Table 6**). and the 38% no-show rate at land-based facilities (see **para. 3.7**).

# 4

# REVIEW AND EVALUATION

## COMPLAINTS

**4.1** Since its launch, the Scheme received much criticism from the public. Both LCSD and this Office received a large number of complaints.

### *Complaints to LCSD*

**4.2** LCSD received a total of 1,059 complaints about the Scheme. Before the Scheme, from January to May 2008, only 230 complaints were about usage of leisure facilities.

**4.3** The complaints about the Scheme were about:

(a) overall arrangements and use of land-based facilities (849 complaints);
(b) use of public swimming pools (131 complaints);
(c) use of water sports centres and golf facilities (30 complaints); and
(d) use of holiday camps (49 complaints).

**4.4** LCSD provided further breakdowns on (a) and (b) above, which constituted the majority (980) of complaints:

**Table 7 Major Aspects of Complaints in the Two Major Categories of Complaints**

| Nature of Complaints | Counts of Complaint* |
|---|---|
| ***(a) Overall Arrangement & Use of Land-based Facilities (Total counts of complaint – 1,358)*** | |
| Difficulty in booking | 485 (36%) |
| Lack of safeguard against abuse and wastage from no-show | 230 (17%) |
| Congestion in on-line booking | 205 (15%) |
| "Free of Charge" arrangement inappropriate | 110 (8%) |
| Booking of free and fee-charging facilities on the same system unfair to fee paying users | 70 (5%) |
| Requirement for walk-in users to surrender the facility back to original hirers upon their late arrival inappropriate | 59 (4%) |
| Re-selling of booked sessions | 52 (4%) |
| No answer to telephone booking hotline | 44 (3%) |
| Duration of the Scheme inappropriate | 38 (3%) |
| ***(b) Use of Swimming Pools (Total counts of complaint – 152)*** | |
| Overcrowding | 24 (16%) |
| Unsatisfactory water quality | 23 (15%) |
| Suspension of hiring by group users desirable | 22 (15%) |
| Disorderly queuing and long queuing time | 18 (12%) |
| Unsatisfactory hygiene and cleanliness | 16 (11%) |

*Source: LCSD*

* *The total count exceeds the total number of complaints received, as some complaints cover several aspects.*

*( ) denotes the percentage of the type of complaint over the total counts of complaint received under category (a) Overall Arrangement & Use of Land-based Facilities or category (b) Use of Swimming Pools, as appropriate.*

### *Complaints to The Ombudsman*

**4.5** Our Office received 33 complaints about the Scheme (see **para. 1.3**) on issues similar to those in **Table 7**. Some details are set out below:

(a) poor planning, execution, technical back-up and insufficient server capacity resulting in seriously congested internet and telephone booking systems;

(b) regular users being squeezed out thus having to forgo their exercise routine; and

(c) no safeguard against abuse and wastage from —

(i) absence of original hirers;
(ii) booking under others' name; and
(iii) provision of booking service at a charge.

## OTHER VIEWS

### *Public Submissions to The Ombudsman*

**4.6** We received 23 public submissions for this direct investigation (see **para. 1.8**). Most of them offered views similar to those expressed in complaints but seven were in praise of the Scheme as taking care of the needs of the less well-off in the community and encouraging people to exercise more.

### *Praise for LCSD*

**4.7** LCSD also received 20 submissions in praise of the Scheme from different channels: newspaper reports, a television programme, telephone calls and e-mails to the 1823 Call Centre[7] and letters.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

**4.8** Through submissions to LCSD, this Office and various channels like the media, some have suggested measures for improvement. The major ones included:

---

[7] *The 1823 Call Centre, operated by the Efficiency Unit of the HKSAR Government, provides a single point of contact for answering enquires and receiving complaints on behalf of 20 participating departments, including LCSD.*

(a) to replace the first-come-first-served booking system with balloting;
(b) to suspend online booking;
(c) to open only non-peak slots for free booking;
(d) to blacklist and penalise those who have failed to take up a specified number of bookings;
(e) to request no-show hirers to pay for the sessions booked; and
(f) to collect full charge from hirers as guarantee for attendance, to be refunded upon signing in for their booked sessions.

## LCSD REVIEWS

### *Interim Review*

**4.9** LCSD conducted an interim review in early July 2008 and considered the public suggestions (see **para. 4.8**) not feasible or appropriate for implementation during the remaining period of the Scheme. On (a), as the Scheme involved over 3 million sessions in 150 venues, putting them to ballot would require more manpower than LCSD could spare. Besides, balloting may not improve the take-up rate by original hirers.

**4.10** LCSD considered that suggestions (b) and (c) would inconvenience the public and would not meet the aim of the Scheme to offer free admission for a wide range of facilities.

**4.11** As regards suggestions (d) to (f), LCSD had reservation on their effectiveness in reducing wastage as a hirer could sign up for a booked session and then leave without actually using it. Stipulating a minimum duration of use so as to accomplish the purposes of these proposals would be bound to invite argument. Besides, LLS would need to be further upgraded to trace the irresponsible hirers or to arrange for refund. This would cost an estimated $2 million and prolong LLS processing time.

**4.12** To apply for refund, under the usual Government procedures, a hirer would have to fill in a form for each booked session and the application would go through a recommending officer, an approving officer and then LCSD's Revenue Unit for issue of cheque in 21 days. This would inconvenience prospective users with

"bureaucracy" and overload staff with excessive administration. Moreover, for cash refund on the spot, special arrangements would have to be made with the Treasury on security measures for custody of cash, daily check of balance and overnight holding limits. This would require considerable extra manpower.

***Preliminary Evaluation***

**4.13** By March 2009, LCSD was in the final stage of completing a preliminary evaluation report on the Scheme which among other aspects covered its preparation, usage, feedback from the public and venue management. LCSD indicated that although some of the suggestions in para. 4.8 are considered not feasible during the Scheme, they could be helpful for similar events in future, provided certain hurdles were overcome and sufficient resources made available. LCSD will take into account the recommendations of this direct investigation before deciding on any improvement measures.

**BOOKING SERVICE AT A CHARGE**

**4.14** As noted in para. 4.5, this Office has received complaints, during and beyond the Scheme, concerning provision of booking service at a charge. There were allegations that some people made profit through using photocopies of a number of others' identity cards to make bookings at LCSD venue counters, while others provided such booking service online at a charge. Some of these activities were alleged to be well-organised business conducted by commercial companies.

**4.15** A company, for instance, promotes online its high success rate of booking LCSD venues for badminton, basketball, football, tennis and volleyball players. Prospective hirers pre-pay the venue fees, plus a service charge of between $60 to $250 and provide the company with their identity references. The company then books the desired venues for hirers. If booking is unsuccessful, the charges paid would be stored in the hirer's account with the company, for use in the next attempt.

**4.16** Under current LCSD practice, bookings are not transferable. To curb transfer of booked sessions, it is LCSD's established practice to check hirers' identity documents and valid permits upon their signing up for their sessions and they are required to stay for the sessions. All staff were further reminded of this practice

during briefings in late April 2008 on the arrangements for the Scheme. However, hirers are allowed to ask other people to book on their behalf.

**4.17** On the issue of booking LCSD facilities on others' behalf at a gain, LCSD has sought advice from the Police and the Department of Justice. Their advice is that offering and charging for booking service is not an offence or a breach of LCSD regulations.

# *5*

# *OBSERVATIONS AND OPINIONS*

**OBJECTIVES OF THE SCHEME**

**5.1** For the duration of the Scheme, all LCSD facilities except holiday camps recorded an increase in usage (see **paras. 3.6, 3.9-3.10**). Moreover, over half of the hirers of land-based facilities who benefited from free admission were "infrequent hirers" who had not booked any LCSD facilities in the previous 12 months (see **para. 3.2**). The Scheme had evidently succeeded in promoting interest in sports and exercise.

**5.2** Support was vocally expressed by some members of the public (see **paras. 4.6-4.7**), and by others implicitly through participation. Generally speaking, the Scheme was clearly a welcome gesture to many in our community.

**5.3** In principle and in concept, we consider the Scheme laudable. The objectives are certainly positive: celebrating with the community the Olympics in China and promoting interest in sports and exercise. The Scheme was boon to the public but, possibly, bane for LCSD staff. Encompassing over 3 million sessions of facilities for free admission over 92 days **and** in the summer months covering the long summer break, the Scheme overlapped with a period when some of the facilities would be in high demand. It was, therefore, no easy task for LCSD.

**5.4** Broadly speaking, LCSD has discharged itself commendably. Nevertheless, there were deficiencies in arrangements. The experience has offered LCSD pointers for reference for similar initiatives in future.

**PLANNING**

**5.5** LCSD has deployed high-level subject officers, under the leadership of an Assistant Director, to plan and execute the Scheme. The team was also tasked to monitor the implementation (see **para. 2.2 & Annex I**). In the latter task, the team had generally done well: keeping a watching brief to make changes in some arrangements from mid-July.

***Booking***

**5.6** Compared to the Scheme, the two previous schemes in 2003 and 2007 (see **paras. 2.3-2.7**) were vastly different in duration, facilities included and booking sessions available (see **Table 1** and **Annex II**) and were, therefore, of limited relevance for reference. In estimating usage of facilities under the Scheme, LCSD has sensibly not only drawn reference from the two previous schemes, but particularly assessed the popularity of various facilities normally. It decided to use all four established booking channels instead of just one single booking channel as had been done for the previous two schemes. The decision aimed to convenience the public, in view of the large volume of sessions available for booking over a considerable duration.

**5.7** LCSD did upgrade the LLS internet booking channel to cater for the anticipated significant increase in internet booking under the Scheme (see **para. 2.17**). We note that upgrading capacity for booking would ease congestion. However, the consideration is whether a one-off scheme justified the investment. Owing to the limited supply of popular facilities and sessions, normally, internet, counter and telephone booking systems are busy at the start of booking every day from 7am to 7:30am. Free admission would inevitably occasion a surge in booking attempts during the peak time. However, further expansion of the internet booking capacity would result in fewer available booking sessions by other booking channels and thus complaints from users of such channels, as well as under-utilisation of the booking systems during non-peak hours. In short, the consideration of enhancing the booking capacity is a matter of judgment on striking a balance between prudent use of public resources, convenience to the public and equal opportunities in making booking for a one-off scheme of three months.

**5.8** We accept that LCSD had taken realistic and reasonable steps -- as indicated in its planned schedule for LLS enhancement, testing and rolling-out -- to

plan carefully for the anticipated influx of bookings under the Scheme (see **paras. 2.17-2.18**).

*Publicity*

**5.9** The publicity plan of the Scheme did not anticipate the need for changes after rollout. As a result, measures and special arrangements introduced thereafter were not fully publicised (see **paras. 2.11-2.12**). Apart from the LCSD website, no information was given to the public about the arrangements for cancellation. Nor was the cancellation form downloadable from its website. The radio APIs for the duration of the Scheme were not revised (see **Annex III**) to publicise the cancellation arrangements or to promote the less popular facilities such as holiday camps (see **para. 3.10**). As the APIs cost only $11,200, or 4%, of the publicity budget, subsequent boost would have incurred little extra expenditure.

*Monitoring*

**5.10** The initial plan of collating monthly statistics (see **para. 2.22**) indicated not only an under-estimation of the size of the wastage problem due to no-show but low alertness of the need for close monitoring of the demand for facilities upon rollout of the Scheme.

## EXECUTION

*Publicity*

**5.11** In the execution stage, LCSD failed to publicise its interim measures, to promote the less popular facilities and to adequately address the public outcry through the media. A few press statements or media interviews would have helped.

**5.12** It may not be easy to incorporate changes into pre-printed materials such as posters and leaflets, but other print media such as newspapers and certainly the electronic media could have helped relay more effectively messages at short notice, in different stages during the Scheme.

*Monitoring*

5.13 Despite inadequacies at the planning stage, LCSD should be commended for acting promptly to rectify defects once detected. Monthly monitoring of usage statistics was quickly changed to daily monitoring (see **para. 2.22**), a standard form for cancelling bookings was introduced at an early stage (see **paras. 2.23-2.24**), and the initial requirement for a minimum number of users introduced as a measure for preventing abuse (see **para. 2.20(b)**) was soon relaxed.

## PREVENTION OF ABUSE

*Cancellation of Booking*

**5.14** This is perhaps a comment on some in our community, that they do not sufficiently value free gifts. No-show rate of original hirers of land-based facilities reached 38%. In this connection, LCSD had clearly under-estimated the incidence of no-show and thus had no plan for publicising or streamlining the arrangements for canceling bookings (see **para. 2.23**). However, the Department was quick to identify and rectify this by introducing cancellation form from 18 July.

**5.15** On the other hand, the arrangements for cancellation were fraught with deficiencies. It was not user-friendly. There was practically no publicity, except the addition of one related "frequently asked question" on the LCSD website. Yet, there was no cancellation form for downloading (see **para. 2.24**). Even the radio APIs, which continued until the end of September, was not revised to feature the cancellation arrangement (see **para. 2.12 & Annex III**). The low cancellation figures speak for the ineffectiveness of the procedures: 420 cancellations, or 0.05%, *versus* about 800,000 no-shows (see **para. 2.25**).

**5.16** To some extent, the incidence of notified cancellation does indicate that responsible hirers were prepared to take the extra time and trouble to release their booked sessions for others. We applaud their civic-mindedness. However, LCSD should streamline the procedures and properly publicise the cancellation arrangements even for normal fee-paying bookings so that responsible hirers may give LCSD prior notice and release their sessions, albeit without refund, for booking by others.

*Usage of Facilities*

5.17 On average, 38% of original hirers of land-based facilities failed to turn up for their booked sessions. For some facilities, the average no-show rate was even higher, at 47%. Even taking into account subsequent usage by walk-in users, 22% of the booked sessions were eventually not used (see **para. 3.7**). This was a sheer waste of public resources.

5.18 Some situations were even more serious. Our spot check revealed 74% and 78% no-show rate in some facilities on some days (see **para. 3.8 & Table 5**). LCSD should examine these cases, identify the reasons for the high no-show rates and devise preventive and promotional measures for future schemes of this nature.

5.19 Due to congestion in internet and telephone booking systems for popular facilities and sessions, intending users had to book early, some perhaps even before being sure they could attend; hence, the high absence rate generally. LCSD should take steps to publicise the mechanism for cancellation, and to educate the public for responsible use of public facilities, especially for free admission schemes.

5.20 For facilities such as fitness rooms, sport climbing walls (see **para. 3.5 & Table 3**) and craft at water sports centres (see **para. 3.9 & Table 6**), where booking rates were low due to the requirement of proof of proficiency, corresponding training sessions, with proper promotion, might help boast interest and usage in these activities.

## REVIEW AND EVALUATION

5.21 LCSD has been quick to review its arrangements albeit in response to complaints and criticisms. It has considered comments and suggestions raised by the public (see **paras. 4.8-4.12**). It has also conducted a preliminary evaluation (see **para. 4.13**). We hope our recommendations in this direct investigation will facilitate its full review and formulation of improvement for similar scheme and even for normal day-to-day processes.

5.22 Some of the proposals from the public would involve costly and time-consuming changes to the booking or refund systems. It would not be realistic, or worthwhile, to introduce these mid-way during the Scheme (see **paras. 4.9-4.12**).

However, these suggestions should be references well worth studying for similar initiatives in the future.

## BOOKING SERVICE AT A CHARGE

**5.23** We accept that hirers should not be required to make the bookings personally. In any case, apart from booking at the counter, such a requirement would be difficult to enforce. We also note the advice from the Police and the Department of Justice that the practice of offering and charging for booking service is not an offence or a breach of LCSD regulations (see **para. 4.17**).

**5.24** However, as LCSD facilities are heavily subsidised by taxpayers[8], offering booking service for private profit is clearly a matter of concern. LCSD should keep a watching brief on the issue so that members of the public, including those less well-off, would not be deprived of chances to use the facilities due to possible monopoly by "professional", commercial providers of booking service.

## REVISED SCHEME

**5.25** The Scheme has quite well achieved Government's objectives: to encourage the public, including those less inclined, to exercise and to maximise use of under-utilised facilities[9]. For these very objectives, we see a case for a scheme on a smaller scale and on a regular basis. A good example is the free access to LCSD museums every Wednesday, which is a much appreciated gesture.

**5.26** Given positive promotion, free admission on a regular basis but only to specified venues could still be welcome by the community. Such a scheme would be more effective in encouraging regular exercise than a one-off free admission scheme. Free access on a fixed weekday would also minimise the disturbance to regular users. To sustain the objective to encourage the public to exercise regularly, the main considerations are:

---

[8] *Report No. 51 of the Director of Audit, Chapter 10, published in November 2008, revealed that the overall subsidy rate for LCSD's recreational and sports services (covering mainly enrolment fees for programmes and admission and hire charges) was 80% in 2007-08.*

[9] *Report No. 51 of the Director of Audit, Chapter 10, published in November 2008, revealed low usage rates of major indoor recreation and sports facilities of LCSD, ranging from 30% to 77% in 2007-08.*

- access on a regular basis, not *ad hoc*; and
- measures against abuse and wastage.

On these lines, LCSD should consider exploring other options.

**5.27** We note that LCSD has introduced a Free Use Scheme to maximise the use of under-utilised facilities (see **para. 2.8**). It should publicise the scheme more widely and consider extending its coverage beyond the present beneficiaries to boost usage further. We believe that with prudent planning, infrequent users thus attracted could be managed without undue interference with the frequent and paying patrons.

# 6

# RECOMMENDATIONS

**6.1** Initiatives like the Scheme have demonstrably helped to encourage the public to exercise and to generate interest in sports and in using LCSD facilities. We believe these objectives well worthwhile and consider the outcome quite positive. However, the Scheme has also attracted some outcry of public dissatisfaction (see **paras. 4.2-4.5**).

**6.2** The lessons learnt from the Scheme should be valuable reference for the planning and execution of similar initiatives. The experience should also prompt the Department to explore free admission, on a minor scale but with regularity, to a selection of facilities – to sustain the above objectives and to maximise use of facilities.

**6.3** Based on our findings and these considerations, The Ombudsman makes the following recommendations to the Director of Leisure and Cultural Services:

**Planning and Execution**

(1) When planning for similar initiatives, care should be taken to balance the interests of both regular paying patrons and prospective clientele attracted by free admission.

(2) To build in flexibility in both planning and execution of publicity arrangements for timely and effective announcement of changes, interim measures and special arrangements (see **paras. 5.9 & 5.11-5.12**).

(3) To build in mechanism for close monitoring of implementation, right from the outset (see **paras. 5.10 & 5.13**).

**Prevention of Abuse**

(4) To provide user-friendly arrangements for cancellation of bookings both during normal fee-paying days and for free admission schemes (see **paras. 5.14-5.16**).

(5) To appeal to the public for responsible use of public facilities (see **para. 5.19**).

(6) To institute safeguards for detecting, deterring and preventing abuse (see **paras. 5.21-5.22**).

(7) To keep a watching brief on the commercial booking services at a charge (see **paras. 5.23-5.24**).

**Other Recommendations**

(8) To analyse the data on usage of facilities and booking channels to devise incentives for use of under-utilised facilities (see **paras. 5.20 & 5.25-5.27**).

(9) To consider promoting the existing Free Use Scheme more widely and extending its coverage beyond the present beneficiaries to maximise the usage of under-utilised facilities (see **paras. 5.25-5.27**).

**6.4** LCSD has accepted all the recommendations. This Office will monitor progress of implementation.

**Office of The Ombudsman**
**Ref. OMB/DI/186**
**March 2009**

# ANNEXES

**Annex I**
**(para. 2.2)**

## List of responsible officers for the planning and monitoring of implementation of the Free Admission Scheme

Assistant Director (Leisure Services)
Chief Leisure Manager (Land-based Venues)
Chief Leisure Manager (Aquatic Venues)
Chief Leisure Manager (Management)
Chief Information Officer
Senior Leisure Manager (Land-based Venues)
Senior Leisure Manager (Computerised Booking)
Senior Leisure Manager (Aquatic Venues)
Senior Leisure Manager (Camps)
Senior leisure Manager (Water Sports & Golf Facilities)
Principal Information Officer (Leisure Services)
Senior information Officer (Leisure Services)
Head (Information Technology)
Information Technology Manager
Leisure Manager (Land-based Venues)
Leisure Manager (Computerised Booking)
Leisure Manager (Aquatic Venues)
Leisure Manager (Camps)
Leisure Manger (Water Sports & Golf Facilities)

**Annex II**
**(para. 2.9)**

## The Number of Each Type of Leisure Facilities Available for the Free Admission Scheme from 1 July to 30 September 2008

| *Item* | *Type of Leisure Facilities* | *Number* |
|---|---|---|
| **(i) Indoor Leisure Facilities** | | |
| 1. | Multi-purpose Arenas for Badminton or Basketball or Volleyball or Netball play | 85 |
| 2. | Squash Courts | 294 |
| 3. | Table Tennis Tables | 172 |
| 4. | Fitness Rooms | 66 |
| 5. | Activity Rooms | 110 |
| 6. | Dance Rooms | 60 |
| 7. | American Pool Tables | 13 |
| 8. | Sport Climbing Walls | 2 |
| 9. | Bowling Greens | 3 |
| 10. | Tennis Courts | 2 |
| 11. | Basketball Court (Purpose-built) | 1 |
| 12. | Golf Driving Bays | 6 |
| **(ii) Outdoor Leisure Facilities** | | |
| 13. | Tennis Courts | 268 |
| 14. | Tennis Practice Courts | 5 |
| 15. | Bowling Greens | 4 |
| 16. | Batting Cage | 1 |
| 17. | Rope Course | 1 |
| 18. | Sport Climbing Wall | 1 |
| 19. | Archery Range | 1 |
| 20. | Golf Driving Bays | 106 |
| 21. | Golf Practice Green | 1 |
| (iii) Public Swimming Pools (except Wan Chai Swimming Pool) | | 35 |
| (iv) Water Sport Centres | | 5 |
| (v) Holiday Camps | | 4 |

**Annex III**
**(para. 2.12)**

# RADIO API VOICEOVER SCRIPT

| | |
|---|---|
| Topic | : Free Admission Scheme of LCSD Leisure Facilities |
| Campaign | : Leisure and Cultural Services Department |
| Version | : Cantonese/Putonghua/English |
| Duration | : 30 seconds |
| Broadcast period | : May 29 to Sept 30, 2008 |

## Cantonese V/O script:

| | |
|---|---|
| 女： | 爹哋，啲奧運選手好犀利呀。 |
| 父： | 想有好身手或者健康身體吖，做多啲運動喇。 |
| 女： | 我知道康文署由七月一日至九月尾，推出免費使用康樂設施計劃，開放平日要收費嘅康樂設施俾市民個人免費使用，我哋都去訂場打波囉。 |
| 父： | 等我上康文署網頁睇吓先。 |
| 女： | 仲可以打電話 2414 5555 查詢架。 |
| vo | 多做運動，迎接奧運 |

## Putonghua V/O script:

| | |
|---|---|
| 女： | 爸爸，那些奧運健兒好厲害呀。 |
| 父： | 要有好身手或是健康身體，多做運動吧！ |
| 女： | 我知道康文署從七月一日至九月底，推出免費使用康樂設施計劃，開放平常要收費康樂設施給市民個人免費使用，我們快訂場打球吧。 |
| 父： | 讓我上康文署網頁看看。 |
| 女： | 也可以打電話 2414 5555 查詢的。 |
| vo | 勤做運動，迎接奧運 |

## English V/O script:

Share the Olympic spirit and exercise more. The Leisure and Cultural Services Department is offering recreation and sports facilities such as sport centres, tennis courts, public swimming pools, holiday camps and water sports centres for individuals to use free of charge from July to September. For details, please call 2414 5555 or visit the department's website.

**********